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ABSTRACT

Elementary school teachers and teachers in training responded to a questionnaire related to their experiences with stress situations in the lives of their students. The responses reflected the teachers' awareness of stress in the children's lives, what resources in the school-family system addressed these areas, their own preparation for intervention, and an assessment of their receptivity to a curriculum designed to teach children stress-coping skills. Results indicated that teachers are aware of stress situations in the lives of their students but the educational system has done little to train them in methods of beneficial intervention. Some reluctance was voiced on venturing into stress areas as classroom topics. (JD)

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Needs, Attitudes and Behaviors of Teachers Relative to Stress Situations of Children*

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Introduction

This study was undertaken as a part of an effort to develop an alcohol education program and to integrate it into an elementary teacher education curriculum. A critical assumption in this work is that for alcohol education to be appropriate for young children, it should be focused within a larger domain of behaviors than drinking/nondrinking. A major area of concern within this larger domain is stress and coping behavior in children. Therefore a study was generated to discover teachers' awareness of stress in the children they teach, their perceptions of their ability to assist children to cope with stress, and their perceptions of the appropriateness of teacher interventions in stress situations of children.

Purpose of the Study

In developing a curriculum on drinking/nondrinking decisions within the context of other psychosocial issues and pressures, an early step should be the assessment of expressed needs of those people who will be the carriers of the curriculum -- elementary school teachers.

The assessment of needs would seem to revolve around three issues:

1) a recognition that problems exist,
2) an expressed lack of preparation for interventions, and
3) a belief that interventions could help children cope with these problems.

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Thus, we wanted to have teachers report whether specific stressful situations which children experience come to their attention as teachers, whether resources on a classroom/school system level are available for interventions, and whether they believe they are professionally prepared to help children cope with these stress situations.

Development of a Needs Assessment Instrument

Holmes and Rahe (1967) designed a method for quantifying the impact of various life events for adults. The range of events they considered included not only negative traumatic events but also positive and desirable ones, since all significant changes in life require coping, adaptation, and readjustment. Such life events have come to be called stresses. Coddington, (1972a, 1972b) in subsequent studies in the tradition of the original work of Holmes and Rahe, focused on events which require readjustment in the lives of children. Coddington developed social readjustment scales appropriate for children in preschool, elementary, junior, and senior high school based on research that found that certain events commonly occur, and/or require a major amount of readjustment.

Items from the Coddington elementary age scale were selected that represent problems which children of this age frequently face. The items were reworded, and some were combined. Two situations were added, alcohol problems at home, and violence at home. These situations often represent chronic stress rather than specific discrete stress events in a child's life. The final list of seven situations used in a needs assessment instrument is shown in Table I. They include two school-linked situations, three home-life events which are publicly acknowledged in our culture today, and two more chronic situations which are socially stigmatized and "touchy".

In addition to a limited number of stress situations, teacher responses were developed to allow teachers to indicate their experiences and opinions by checking

responses to these child stress situations. The responses were generated from a series of questions that could be organized into four groups called indexes. Table II indicates twelve responses in four indexes: Teacher Awareness, Teacher Action Behavior, Teacher Ability to Respond, and Teacher Receptivity.

A needs assessment instrument was designed that consisted of a questionnaire grid with two parts: 1) seven childhood stress situations and, 2) twelve teacher responses. This is shown in Figure I.

Teachers were given the following written instructions with the questionnaire grid: "Attached is a list of situations (stresses) which elementary age children often face and must deal with in their own lives. We would like your help in getting an idea of what elementary school teachers might need in order to effectively help children cope with these problems.

Various teacher responses are listed for the set of situations. If you have experienced that response please check (✓) that box; if not, please leave it blank. Please check as many responses for each situation as you feel appropriate."

There was an opportunity on the grid page for teachers to indicate the grade level at which they teach, and number of years teaching experience.

TABLE I

CHILDHOOD STRESS SITUATIONS

Bad time with other children at school

Moving to new neighborhood or school

Serious illness/death in the family

Separation or divorce of parents

New family members (by birth or marriage)

Violence at home

Alcohol problems at home

TABLE II

TEACHER RESPONSES TO STRESS SITUATIONS OF CHILDREN

Categories of Response	Specific Responses
Index 1 Teacher Awareness	R1: Children talk to me about this privately R2: Children have brought this up in class R3: I have observed children reacting to this
Index 2 Teacher Action Behaviors	R4: This is part of our curriculum R5: Teachers should talk about this in class R6: I find someone in the school system better qualified to help R7: I contact parents when that would be helpful
Index 3 Teacher Ability to Respond	R8: In discussing this with my class, I have the facts R9: In discussing this with my class, I have the skills R10: In discussing this with my class, I have the materials
Index 4 Teacher Receptivity	R11: This area is important for my grade R12: Children can be taught skills to deal with this

Please check (✓) if you have experienced a response. Please leave blank if you have not.

Grade level at which you teach_____ Number of years you have been teaching_____

SITUATIONS	TEACHER RESPONSES											
	Children talk to me about this privately	Children have brought this up in class	I have observed children reacting to this	This is part of our curriculum	Teachers should talk about this in class	I find some one in the school system better qualified to help	I contact parents when that would be helpful	In discussing this with my class I have the facts	In discussing this with my class I have the skills	In discussing this with my class I have the materials	This area is important for my grade	Children can be taught skills to cope with this
Bad time with other children at school												
Moving to new neighborhood or school												
Serious illness/death in the family												
Separation or divorce of parents												
New family members (by birth or marriage)												
Violence at home												
Alcohol problems at home												

FIGURE I

Teacher Sample

Two groups were sampled with the Needs Assessment Instrument -- elementary teachers-in-service (N=36) and elementary teachers-in-training (N=47). The teachers-in-service group consisted of the staffs of four elementary schools (K-6) in Michigan with differing characteristics. The four schools can be described as follows:

School A is an elementary school with fifteen teachers of grades K-6 in a community of approximately 4600 residents. Some 75 percent of the pupils attending this school reside within the corporate limits of the town, while the other 25 percent reside outside the town limits. School B is an elementary school with ten teachers of grades K-6 in a school district which can be described as suburban to a city of approximately 50,000 residents. School C is an elementary school with fourteen teachers of grades K-6 in a residential area of a city of approximately 45,000 population. School D is an elementary school with eight teachers of grades K-6 serving a mixed neighborhood (residential, business, industry, transportation) of a city of approximately 45,000 population.

Forty seven teachers-in-service were given the Needs Assessment Instrument, with thirty-six completed instruments returned.

Fifty elementary student teachers, representing teachers-in-training, were sampled near the end of their student teaching experience. This experience was taking place in one of three student teaching centers in Michigan. All of these students were in the final year of their four year preparation program, and all had participated in practicum experiences during the four years. Forty-seven student teachers completed the instrument.

Data Analysis

Each stress situation and each teacher response on the Needs Assessment Instrument could be looked at individually. However, in order to obtain answers to questions about Teacher Awareness, Teacher Action Behaviors, Teacher Ability

to Respond, and Teacher Receptivity, all stress situations were examined together with the exception of added analyses of "alcohol problems at home" and "violence at home." Teacher responses were grouped into four categories (indexes) on the basis of conceptual meaning as described in Table II. The reporting of results is based on counting checkmarks (check/no check) and scoring as "some" when more than one-third of the maximum possible "check" responses occur in a cell, scoring as "few" when one-third or fewer of the maximum possible checkmarks occur.

Index I is called Teacher Awareness and consists of three responses R1, R2, and R3 in Table II. These are alternate ways in which a teacher may become aware of stress situations which impinge on the lives of the children in his/her class. No one way is more significant than others, nor excludes the others. Grouping all three responses allows the examination of the teacher's report of knowing about situations in whatever way(s) they have come to his/her attention. A count of the relative frequencies of checkmarks to R1, R2, and R3 comes to essentially equal frequencies in each category. That is, teachers report that children talk to them privately about as often as they report that children bring up a situation in class, and each of these is reported about as often as the teacher observing that a child is reacting to a situation.

The two teacher responses, R11 and R12, were grouped into Index 4, which is termed Teacher Receptivity. Checks in the R11 column indicate that the stress situations listed seem relevant to the teacher for the grade level at which he/she teaches. Checks in the R12 column indicate a belief that skills to cope with these situations are teachable. The relative frequency of checks in R11 is similar to R12, therefore Index 4 represent the responses to both equally well.

Index 3, Teacher Ability to Respond, is composed of R8, R9, and R10, the various resources a teacher would have to have in order to feel able to teach about particular stress situations: facts, skills, and materials. Teachers may be aware of and receptive to children who are facing difficult and painful situations. However, if skills and resources have not been provided to the teachers, either in

their teacher-training experiences, or in in-service sessions, it is likely that they will not feel comfortable or qualified to deal with these situations on a classroom basis. The three responses R8, R9, and R10 then ask the teacher to report whether they feel they have been equipped professionally to be helpful in their role as teachers.

Index 2, Teacher Action Behaviors, is made up of somewhat more disparate items than the other indexes. R4 and R6 describe school system resources provided for teachers. R7 is a teacher option, talking to parents, as a resource in helping children. R5, for which a separate analysis has been done in some instances, reflects the teachers' evaluation of the appropriateness of the various situations as topics for teachers to bring up in their classrooms. The theme that ties these four items together then, is the request that teachers look at the system within which they work: school, home, and community, in relation to the situations children in their classrooms experience.

Results and Discussion

Results of the responses to the survey appear in Table III. The most striking result is in the pattern that appears throughout the Table. As a group, teachers report at least some awareness of and receptivity to dealing with stressful situations in childrens' lives. However, few teachers feel they have the resources or training to do so.

Experienced teachers, even those with 10 or more years of teaching experience, feel as much at a loss as student teachers in having professional resources to be helpful to children in coping. (Table III) Conversely, the student teachers' responses seem to indicate that the current teacher education curriculum does not address the areas of children's stresses more than past curricula did.

It might be expected that differences among teachers' impressions of the stresses that children need to deal with, and their own feelings about appropriate timing for teaching about stress events, would be associated with the grade level

at which they teach. Responses of teachers of the lower elementary grades (K-3) were compared to those of teachers of the upper elementary grades (4-6). Teachers at both levels reported awareness of stress situations for children in their grades. Teachers at lower elementary grades were divided in their receptivity to teaching about stress events at their grade level, while teachers of the upper elementary grades responded more consistently to being receptive. By about a three to one ratio, teachers of all elementary grade levels felt there were not resources available in the system or in their professional development to integrate such areas into their classroom teaching.

Teachers report that children bring life-problems to their attention from the lower grades, and continue to do so in the upper elementary grades. In fact, most of the teachers at all elementary levels (K-6) reported that children in their classes talk about some situations occuring in their lives which are disruptive and require some dealing or "adjustment." These teachers appear to agree with Coddington's data, that childhood does have family and personal problem-solving situations associated with it.

Most teachers (31 of 36 experienced teachers, 41 of 47 student teachers) report being aware of the impact of the stress situations listed on the children they teach. It might seem logical that knowing what children are up against would serve as a base for the components of the Receptivity Index; that teachers would conclude that these areas are important for their grade level, and might also have some optimism about teaching children skills to help them cope. In fact, about half of the aware student teachers (19 of 41), and one-third of the aware experienced teachers (10 of 31) are not receptive. It appears that experience leads to more certainty that the same problems will be seen again and again (i.e., are important for their grade). Student teachers cannot know that yet. Also, the optimism about the potential for intervention increases rather than decreases with experience, which is a positive sign. Possibly the nonreceptive teachers are reflecting the realities they experience. They have not had curriculum, professional skills, facts, or materials related to helping

in these stress areas. It is surprising that as many teachers persist in seeing the importance of these areas, and believe that children can be taught coping skills.

Experienced teachers from schools in four quite different communities provided a sampling of a range of community settings. The work of Coddington supports the idea that the situations listed are in the spectrum of the experiences of all elementary age children. It may be possible that the community personalness versus anonymity affects the amount of reporting by children of home events to teachers. However, the responses of the teachers across the four communities were strikingly similar on the awareness index.

Responses by community to the item "teachers should talk about this in class," R5, were examined. This item indicates the extent of feelings of permission or restraint on the teacher to bring up private subjects publicly. Teachers may personally feel that certain situations are important and problematic for children in their grade, but may sense that it is not appropriate for teachers to discuss them. Communities (i.e., parents, school boards as representatives) can react strongly against teachers "meddling" in private and "touchy" content areas. Since five of the seven stress situations listed refer to events in the family/home life of children, and "violence at home" and "alcohol problems at home" in particular are "touchy," the teacher response "teachers should talk about this in class" can be viewed as an indication of the teachers' perceptions of acceptable topics in their relationship to children. There were no trends indicating differences among teachers on this response in terms of the type of community in which they teach.

Results and Discussion of Alcohol Problems at Home and Violence at Home

Teacher responses to the two situations "alcohol problems at home" and "violence at home" were examined individually to compare them to responses to all stress situations as a group. This analysis focuses on teachers' responses to these severe, perhaps chronic, and stigmatized areas of stress in children's lives.

TABLE III

Summary of Results

	Index of Teacher Awareness		Index of Teacher Receptivity		Index of Teacher Action Behaviors		Index of Teacher Ability to Respond	
	Some	Few	Some	Few	Some	Few	Some	Few
Student Teachers (N = 47)	41	6	21	26	19	28	4	43
All Experienced Teachers (N = 36)	31	5	23	13	16	20	8	28
Teachers with 10 or more years experience only (N = 20)	18	2	11	9	9	11	1	19
Experienced Early Elementary Teachers (Grades K-3) (N = 23)	19	4	13	10	8	15	3	20
Experienced Later Elementary Teachers (Grades 4-6) (N = 11)	10	1	10	1	6	5	0	11

Note: The number in the "Some" column represents the number of teachers who checked more than one-third of the possible cells within that index on the Needs Assessment Instrument. The number in the "Few" column represents the number of teachers who checked fewer than one-third of the possible cells within that index on the Needs Assessment Instrument.

Since experienced teachers and student teachers had parallel distributions of responses, the term "teachers" refers to both groups combined.

For Teacher Awareness, about one-half the teachers indicated that alcohol problems came to their attention (Table IV). Almost three-fourths indicated that they are aware of problems of violence at home (Table IV). However, this is fewer than for all situations taken together (Table IV). It is probable that the lower percentages reflect the reality that many fewer children in a class would be experiencing alcohol or violence-related problems at home than some of the other situations which are included in the "situations" group, "bad time with other children at school," for example. Of course, some children are cautious about disclosing stigmatized occurences in their family; and teachers may discourage children from telling them about such things, particularly if they have found they have little help to offer a child in a painful home situation. However, one-half or more of the teachers reported that they can anticipate a substantial number of children in their class will be turning to them for help with home problems which are severely stressful, as well as sensitive.

For Teacher Receptivity, the pattern of response for the alcohol and violence situations alone coincided with that of all situations taken together. Teachers were about equally divided between those who reported relevance and optimism about school-based intervention and those who did not (Table IV). Although teachers reported observing disruption by these two stress situations less frequently, they do view them as important and as amenable to intervention as are all stress situations combined.

When examining the resources teachers reported having (Index of Teacher Ability to Respond), few felt they have the curriculum or the professional preparation to help children cope with alcohol or violence problems at home (Table IV). The only available resource they reported is a referral to "someone in the school system better able to help." In fact, many teachers did not feel that this is an area which teachers should talk about in class.

TABLE IV

Summary of Results for Alcohol and Violence Stress Situations

Alcohol Problems at Home	Index of Teacher Awareness		Index of Teacher Receptivity		Index of Teacher Action Behaviors		Index of Teacher Ability to Respond	
	Some	Few	Some	Few	Some	Few	Some	Few
Student Teachers								
All Stress Situations	41	6	21	26	19	28	4	43
Alcohol Problems at Home	28	19	20	27	41	6	5	42
Experienced Teachers (N = 36)								
All Stress Situations	31	5	23	13	16	20	8	28
Alcohol Problems at Home	19	17	18	18	24	12	5	31
Student Teachers and Experienced Teachers Combined (N = 83)								
All Stress Situations	72	11	44	39	35	48	12	71
Alcohol Problems at Home	47	36	38	45	65	18	10	73
Violence at Home								
Student Teachers (N = 47)								
All Stress Situations	41	6	21	26	19	28	4	43
Violence at Home	32	15	21	26	39	8	5	42
Experienced Teachers (N = 36)								
All Stress Situations	31	5	23	13	16	20	8	28
Violence at Home	27	9	14	22	26	10	1	35
Student Teachers and Experienced Teachers Combined (N = 83)								
All Stress Situations	72	11	44	39	35	48	12	71
Violence at Home	59	24	35	48	65	18	6	77

Note: The number in the "Some" column represents the number of teachers who checked more than one-third of the possible cells within that index on the Needs Assessment Instrument. The number in the "Few" column represents the number of teachers who checked fewer than one-third of the possible cells within that index on the Needs Assessment Instrument.

Overall, it appears that teachers are reporting a predicament. Teachers know that many of the children in their class are undergoing severe home problems; they realize that these are important problems for children of that age; they have little professional capability to help; and finally, they have a great deal of hesitancy to venture into these areas as classroom topics.

Summary and Conclusion

Thirty six teachers-in-service and forty-seven teachers-in-training responded to a questionnaire related to their experiences with stress situations in the lives of children in their classes. A questionnaire grid presented seven stress situations which affect elementary age children. Twelve teacher responses were designed to allow teachers to describe their relevant experiences. These responses reflect (1) teachers' awareness of stress in the children's lives; (2) their resources within the school-family system which address these areas; (3) estimates of their own professional preparation for interventions and (4) an assessment of their receptivity to a curriculum designed to teach children stress-coping skills.

The most striking result from this survey can be summarized quite straightforwardly: elementary teachers in a range of communities, with a wide span of years of teaching experience, across the elementary grades, are well aware that children in their classrooms are involved in crisis and chronic stress situations in school and at home. Teachers' responsivity to these stresses indicates that they are willing to listen to children, and that children see them as a potential source of support. However, the teachers overwhelmingly report that the educational system has done little to enhance their capability (curriculum, materials, facts or skills), with which to implement beneficial interventions.

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